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Mapping The Kominas' sociomusical transnation: punk, diaspora, and digital media

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mapping The Kominas' sociomusical transnation: punk, diaspora, and digital media

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The Kominas is a South Asian American punk band known for its iconic role within the punk-inspired, Muslim-affiliated music culture self-labeled as 'Taqwacore'. Since its national tour in 2006, The Kominas has been creating a radically translocal social geography comprised of musicians, listeners, artists, filmmakers, and bloggers on- and off-line. The band concocts a transnational sound, combining elements of Punjabi and punk music. This paper examines The Kominas' web production and interactions over digital social media on Myspace and Twitter. It discusses how the band members contemplate their troubled sense of national belonging; and illustrates how they build a diasporic space that is digitally produced and unified by minoritarian politics. This ethnographic project uses participant-observation and tools from digital humanities (data-mining and geospatial visualization) to map the transnational contours of The Kominas' self-made community.

Keywords: South Asian identity; punk; popular music; internet; digital humanities; digital ethnography

The Kominas is a South Asian American punk rock band based in Northeastern United States. Formed in Boston, Massachusetts in 2006, the band is well-known for its association with the grassroots music culture self-labeled as 'Taqwacore.' The prefix 'taqwa' is a Quranic Arabic term meaning 'fear-inspired love' or 'love-based fear' for the divine. The suffix 'core' refers to its punk roots, highlighting the do-it-yourself ideology and subversive attitudes central in hardcore punk music scenes. Writer Michael Muhammad Knight coined the term 'Taqwacore' in his novel about a group of college-age individuals who live in a house together in Buffalo, New York (2004). Knight conceived the term as a way to reclaim a space for an alternative practice of Islam inflected with the punk anti-status-quo ethos.

The world shared by The Kominas, me, and many other active members of the Taqwacore scene, is embedded in a global digital media network. Since 2007, The Kominas has been vigorously creating a transnational social terrain via online social networking and face-to-face interactions through touring. Members of the band have crossed the borders of more than six nation/states including Pakistan, United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Austria and the US, leaving their home in Northeastern United States to perform in three continents of the world, and establishing friendly networks across North America, Europe, the Middle East, South and Southeast

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Asia. The Kominas' transnational sound and community, I argue, are linked to, if not a consequence of, the feeling of lack of national belonging and social comfort experienced by individuals of South Asian descent living in the United States (Maira, 2009). Responses to the events on 11September, 2001 – Islamphobia and the War on Terror – brought this collective state of melancholia into relief. The members of The Kominas have experienced discrimination and alienation, similar to many individuals of South Asian, Muslim, and Arabic heritage living in the US. In their everyday life, they juggle the consequences of neo-Orientalist and 'civilizational' (Polumbo-Liu, 2002) discourses that partition the world into two opposing halves, namely, Muslim and Western. The band members have suggested that they never feel quite at home when they physically are home. They have written songs with titles such as 'Sharia Law in the USA' to question the racializing surveillance upon individuals assumed to be of Muslim descent. The song 'Suicide Bomb the Gap', for example, subverts the terror-infused imagery of South Asian and Muslim masculinity that is rampantly circulated in mainstream news media.

This article, however, does not elaborate on the overt instances of the band's resistance against racializing media and surveillance. Instead, it focuses on how the members of the band have asserted themselves in reclaiming their own spaces across national and regional boundaries, in the context of post-9/11 geopolitics. Looking at The Kominas' interactions over digital social media, this article seeks to articulate the band's self-made geography. The band deploys the punk sound and do-it-yourself social-networking to re-territorialize and re-embed itself into a world partitioned by ideology, politics, and migration. In doing so, The Kominas decenters the Anglo-American domination of punk and rock music with the creation of an alternative community, a new home away from its physical home.

In *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (2009), Sunaina Maira investigates how young South Asian Muslim immigrants negotiate their alienation, social discomfort, and lack of national belonging. Maira outlines the ways in which these youth interpret and repurpose popular culture and media to express dissent toward US imperialism and military actions. In an example, she describes an informant's expression of 'ambiguous dissent' against US imperialism in the form of personal webpages and mashup images circulated on the Internet (2009, pp. 210–213). These digital moments, however, are left un-theorized in Maira's work. This paper responds to Maira's work by highlighting the role of digital music and social media in the South Asian American expression of post-9/11 dissent and ethnic pride.

This essay argues that digital media have enabled the creation of generative spaces for individuals to share personal and collective discontentment. Digital spaces have become a vital alternative to users' repressed physical reality. Following the works on digital sociality within minority music cultures in a postnational context (Luvaas, 2009; Murthy, 2007, 2010; Pinard & Jacobs, 2006), I examine The Kominas' dynamic geographical occupation, digitally and physically instantiated.

Theoretically, I build on Josh Kun's (2005) conception of 'audiotopia . . . [as] small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sound, noise, and music' (2005, p. 21). Kun uses the concept of audiotopia to explore the meaning of music in spatial terms, specifically 'the spaces that the music itself contains, the spaces that music fills up, the spaces that music helps us to imagine as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces' (2005, p. 21). Kun's formulation focuses on the emotional and sensual register of music as embedded in recorded

sound. In this paper, I broaden Kun's conception of audiotopia to consider not only the psychoacoustic space produced by music, but also a variety of sociomusical spaces created by a band – live and documented, embodied and virtual, physical and imagined.

To trace and document these varied lived spaces, I applied the methods of field research with an integrated focus on the physical and the digital. I spent two years following The Kominas, tracking the band's musical and social engagements including live performances, touring, networking, promoting, and show booking. These processes took place in both online and offline environments. In these variously mediated social spaces marked as Taqwacore, I participated as a fan, blogger,[1] and fellow musician. Methodologically, I extended the methods of participant observation from the physical into the virtual realm of interaction. I position the digital as an extension of the physical and *vice versa*. My digital participation is no less important than my physical participation in the scene.

In what follows, I will describe how The Kominas reconfigures the world's geography to make a home in a punk transnation. I will do so while reflecting on the dynamic range of mediation in the band's sociomusical formation. First, in an analysis of the band's web production and social media engagement, I discuss how the band established a defiant, minority-based community for fellow musicians through forming musical kinships and a web-based record label. This analysis examines the musicians' creation of a 'brown' ethno-racial social space and unfolds the relationship between race and ethnicity in a South Asian postcolonial context. The second section focuses on the band's use of the social networking site Myspace as a means to extend in-person interactions into a global network of listeners and supporters. This section delves into my application of digital humanities methods, specifically web scraping and geospatial visualization, to map the transnational contours of The Kominas' digital social terrain.

A Bbrown Eethno-Rracial Ccontinuum

On Twitter, The Kominas actively sent instant messages of 140 characters or less referred to as 'tweets' to its fans and friends. The band sent tweets that contain the word 'brown' to provoke and organize online dialogues about global South Asian and other minority identities. The band used the hashtag #brownbandreparations – following the convention of using a hashtag (#) to group messages under a common topical label – to relay a message from its brother band, the psychedelic alternative country duo Sunny Ali and the Kid (THEKOMINAS, 2010). In the blogosphere, writers flaunted a similar connection between The Kominas and brownness. On Washington, DC-based music and commentary site *True Genius Requires Insanity* (TGROnline, 2010), a contributing blogger proclaimed that 'The future of American punk is brown,' alluding to The Kominas' first album *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* (2008). A blogger on music and opinion site *Elivindotorg* ascertained: 'Is 2010 the year punk turns brown?' (Elivindotorg, 2010). In more mainstream press, *MTV Iggy* announced its endorsement for The Kominas as 'beloved brown brothers' (2009).

What are the ethnic, racial, and geopolitical implications of brownness in The Kominas' social world? In this section, I discuss the ways in which The Kominas transforms the notion of diaspora by deploying a radically inclusive brown ethno-racial identity. This brown sociomusical kinship, at times, stems from an ethnic space,

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marked by a shared Pakistani-American or South Asian pan-ethnic identity. In other contexts, brownness is charged with racial meanings as the band explicates its minority position within the Anglo-American dominance in rock music in US society. The brown ethno-racial identification enables a productive movement between a conventional notion of diaspora oriented toward an ancestral homeland and a politically charged space that centers minority experiences in the postcolonial era. In what follows, I will outline how the band forms a network of friends within and across the boundaries of the Pakistani and South Asian diaspora, through an active engagement with digital social media.

More often than not, The Kominas has used the term 'brown' to express a sense of fraternity based on a shared Pakistani heritage. Members of the band adopt a creative naming practice that highlights its musical kinship with other bands. The band renames its physical locations to signify its Pakistani background by playfully adding '-tan(i)' to the names of the US cities in its friend network. For instance, The Kominas labeled its birthplace as 'Bostonstan' on its Twitter profile. In an *MTV Iggy* interview, Basim Usman, the bassist of The Kominas, describes his brother's band Sunny Ali & the Kid as being 'Phillistani,' a term signifying its home base in Philadelphia (Kishwer, 2010). More recently, two of The Kominas' members relocated in the so-called 'Phillistan,' neighboring their brown brothers in Sunny Ali & the Kid. The logic of this naming convention extends to the band's personal identities online. The name of Basim's *Livejournal* blog is 'Punkistani'; drummer Imran's Twitter handle is 'Rockistani.'

At other times, The Kominas' self-created discourse conflates its Pakistani and South Asian affiliations. On its official band website, The Kominas describes itself as a 'desi punk outfit comprised of four brown sons of South Asian parents.' This statement subsumes the descriptors 'brown' and 'South Asian' under the label of 'desi.' It is unlikely that the members of the band confuse ethnic and racial meanings of these terms. On Twitter, Basim sent out a declarative message that comments on the relationship between desi, an ethnic identity, and brown, a racial identity: 'we're a new breed of desi that doesn't have to forgo brownness to get into patently non-desi things' (BasimBTW, 2011). This statement suggests that previously, desi artists who engaged in cultural activities labeled as non-desi had to avoid or veil their race-based position as a brown minority. Basim's assertion encourages the retention of brownness as a racial identifier in contexts markedly non-South-Asian. This assertion, I argue, presents a new ethno-racial space for individuals of South Asian descent and challenges the essentialist conception of what it means to be ethnically desi. Basim statement broadens the desi ethnic continuum to include non-desi cultural processes, thus allowing the desi ethnic minority to claim ownership over cultural practices outside of its group. This is evident in the second part of the tweet – 'to get into patently non-desi things' – in which Basim prescribes an anti-assimilation ideology. According to this stance, a desi individual could retain his or her minority status even when the individual, as an outsider minority, engages in a non-South-Asian cultural activity. I read this redefinition as a politicized proclamation that re-positions ethnicity, not in isolation, but in relation to the material and historical conditions of race and racial injustice. This ethno-racial continuum couches all desi experiences within the minority experience in the postcolonial context. It also enables the racialized notion of brownness to exist broadly in a recontexualized ethnic spectrum that includes both the South-Asian and the non-South-Asian experiences.

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Basim's assertion for a brown ethno-racial continuum fits with the psychosocial geography as articulated in the song 'Par Desi.' In the recording, Basim's voice shivers as he sings the chorus line, 'In Lahore it's raining water, in Boston it rains boots.' The subject in the song defines his physical home in Boston, where he experienced an assault by skinhead punks. He sings, 'They tried to stomp me out, but they only fueled the flame.' The song narrates a history of migration and the emotions of displacement. It raises the questions, 'Where do I point to blame, when men scatter like moths? /... how'd I get here, from a land with long monsoons?' Local alienation fuels the nostalgia for Lahore, a home far away from home. This song describes an emotional geography – a spatial containment in Boston (and by extension, the United States) in juxtaposition with a safe refuge in Lahore, Pakistan, remotely located on the South Asian subcontinent. Musically, this song combines rhythmic elements of ska-punk, a subgenre of punk common in the local music scenes in Boston, and bhangra, a dance music from the cultural region in East Pakistan and North India known as Punjab, on the guitar to form the rhythmic backbone. This song ties the minority experience of a race-based alienation in Boston to the diasporic identity rooted in ethnic migration. Though this song does not explicitly locate its time-place in terms any ethnic or racial terms, as a musical statement, it resonates with what Basim has declared as the meaning of desi and brown identities.

I argue that this unique conception of a brown ethno-racial continuum fuels the band's efforts in politicizing its seemingly apolitical cultural engagement. The discursive continuum extends into how the band textually represents its own music. In 2010, The Kominas and Sunny Ali & the Kid formalized their musical brotherhood by creating an independent record label called Poco Party in 2010. Drummer Imran Malik states that a motivation behind starting Poco Party was to engage in the cultural process of taste-making or, in his words, 'establishing an aesthetic' (Imtiaz, 2010a):

> We don't identify with Islam as much as we identify with our *Pakistani* heritage. Songs like "Pardesi"; you take a typical iktara [a traditional one-string instrument] riff and mix it with reggae and ska. That kind of stuff is exciting to us. The idea is not to fuse these kinds of music, but to take *South Asian* music and translate it into something where you use it with the instruments we know how to play because we grew up in America, we identify with rock culture and the instruments. And the idea of three to five *brown* kids making music... you can use your own vocabulary, so that's what we're doing, talking about things that we talk about between ourselves. (Imtiaz, 2010b; my italics)

Imran connects the band members' Pakistani heritage to the practice of identity expression through music that is markedly South Asian. This diasporic affiliation with South Asia and Pakistan is expressed to be in relation to the experience of being a racial minority in the host country: in Imran's words, as 'brown kids' who 'grew up in America... and identify with rock culture.' The notion of translating South Asian musical elements and Pakistani heritage to be understood as 'American' rock music, I contend, is more politicized than what it appears to be. Rejecting the mix-bag model of fusion, Imran privileges the act of translation to emphasize the role of agency in cultural mediation. I see this musical translation as a performative act, empowering and politicized. More than just an assertion of a personal identity, this translation

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highlights the marginal position of a postcolonial translator as a brown racial minority, as someone who is neither black or white, and grew up listening to and loving rock music, but having never felt embraced by the culture surrounding the music. The Kominas' brown identification alongside its brother band challenges the black and white racial binary that has organized the discourses of rock and punk music (Shank, 2001). The idea of filtering American rock music through the lens of diasporic Pakistani experiences and South Asian sensibility facilitates the formation of a cultural space for the formerly invisible and silenced minority participants to feel a degree of social comfort and to voice their perspectives.

The design of Poco Party's website offers further insight into the record label's aesthetic and ethical orientation. The wallpaper background of the website is a map of the British India during Britiain's colonial occupation of the Indian subcontinent. To begin with, this map reminds web users of the subjugation of the Indian subcontinent under the British Raj, and the historical legacies of colonialism. This map insinuates Poco's Party's minoritarian status of being brown in the global postcolony. On the record label's blog, Basim posted a provocative postcolonialist interpretation of the video game series Mario Brothers. In his analysis, Basim likens the evil Bowser's (the main antagonist) takeover of the Mushroom Kingdom as the British colonization of India; the character of Toad as the Indian Raja (Indian ruling figure of the British Indian Empire); and equating the heroic efforts of the Mario Brothers to the neo-imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan waged by the West. Alluding to Spivak's well-known article 'Can the Subaltern speak?', Basim claims that he empathizes with the minor characters in the video game, or in his words, the 'mute sub-alterns' of the Mushroom kingdom. He explains, 'At the end of the day, we are all a bunch of turtles weary of white people jumping on us. They can collect extra life after extra life, but when we get stomped we're gone forever' (Poco Party, 2010). Basim's blog post offers a defiantly anti-colony critique of the British colonization of India. It is a perspective that adamantly articulates the silenced voices of the colonized.

Alternatively, the map of the British Indian Empire could be read as hopes for the re-unification of the subcontinent separated by the violent partition in 1947. I have observed the notion of unification in practice by the band in person. In its performative deployment, unification acts as an emotional compass that brings together individuals across social barriers defined by national origins, ethnicity, religion, and beyond. At their stop in Charlottesville on the 2009 tour, the members of The Kominas accompanied Omar Waqar, the brainchild behind Qawwali[2] punk project Sarmust, in the performance of his song 'Return to Ambala.' Strumming the chords on his acoustic classical guitar, Omar repeats the chorus lines: 'They call it partition/it's more like separation,' Omar and his backing band moved the crowd to join in a participatory call and response reminiscent of a Qawwali chant. I clapped and sang along, feeling an intense emotional unification with everyone in the room. This performance broadened the notion of unification to fit the immediate context of 2009 United States, creating a social space that was inviting to other misfits. The performance brought together the performers and the audience, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian, Pakistani and Indian, South Asian and East Asian, black, white, and brown.

Furthermore, the band's forging of a brown identity can be discussed in an explicitly anti-racist and anti-colonialism context with the respect to discourses

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about rock music and the postcolonial condition. In an interview with *MTV Iggy,* Basim makes note of the band's recent changes: 'We're singing less and less in English. We may pull a Bad Brains and phase the rock out all together!' (Kishwer, 2010). Basim's juxtaposition of 'singing less and less in English' and 'phase the rock out' is intriguing. Both phrases imply a movement away from the center. Punjabi language, in this example, represents a movement away from the English linguistic center in rock music culture worldwide. The reference of the black hardcore band Bad Brains further reinforces the decentering of the white-dominated punk rock music, as well as the broader rock music category.[3] In the same interview, Basim describes his goal: 'To get white people fluent in Punjabi, so they can teach it to brown people' (Kishwer, 2010). In this provocative statement, Basim makes an analogy between the historical fact of European colonialism and the Anglo-American dominance within rock music. The Punjabi punk invasion prophesied by Basim is not just about linguistic translation. Aspiring to shift the power center from white to brown people, Basim is hinting at a minoritarian global punk project. Basim's statement thus aims to de-colonialize punk rock music, and subsequently, the global society.

Alongside its multi-diasporic brown brothers, the members of The Kominas have adapted the notion of unification in flexible ways to engage in minoritarian politics in various settings. Remapping the South Asian subcontinent and its related diasporic hubs as their own, they have worked to ameliorate the effects of imperialist colonialism of the past and the postcolonial social partitioning of the present. Using digitally produced media, The Kominas has created an inclusivist space for brown-identified social formation beyond the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and geography. This space is a reparative response in face of the historical (Hebdige, 1979; Kalra, Hutnyk, & Sharma, 1996; Zuberi, 2001) and the present (Krishnan, 2011) exclusion of South Asian and other minoritarian subjectivities in punk rock.

The Taqwacore digital diaspora

The use of social networking site Myspace has been documented as a key factor that contributes to the birth of the Taqwacore scene (Crafts, 2009). The most accepted narrative about the inception of the scenes goes something like this: Using social networking site Myspace and email, Mike Knight reached out to various punk rockers of Muslim heritage living in North America, forming a network of friends and enthusiasts around the self-identified label of Taqwacore. In the summer of 2007, Knight joined together with five US and Canada-based bands including The Kominas, turning this online community into a physical reality. They organized their first collective tour and dubbed it 'Taqwa-tour.' The bands, along with friends, fans, documentary photographer Kim Badawi, and filmmaker Omar Majeed, toured North America, traveling from the US east coast to the Midwest in a painted-green school bus that Knight had purchased on eBay.

The Kominas' do-it-yourself network is comprised of Muslim, South Asian, and other Taqwacore-inspired musicians, listeners, artists, filmmakers, and bloggers. In a radio interview, Basim attributes the nascent formation of the Taqwacore scene to the online communication between Mike Knight and the Muslim punk musicians across North America. Basim said:

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> I guess there were a lot of kids playing in various scattered bands, standard rock bands. Because, I guess, we all have Muslim names, we would be asked questions about Islam . . . We got in touch with each other. And we met lots of people who were into punk, into Islam already . . . . The Internet played a big part in this. We all got connected and I guess we tried to flesh out this idea of a cultural space. (Akbar & Hsiao, 2009)

I became aware of the Taqwacore scene by first listening to this radio interview with Basim. Then via Twitter and Myspace, I reached the members of The Kominas and scheduled a meeting in Boston (this interaction is recounted in the beginning of the article). After I met and interviewed the band, I posted my review of the band's first album *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* on my blog YellowBuzz.org. This blog post became my entry into the conversation stream brought together by the members of the Taqwacore community who were using the #taqx hashtag on Twitter. How I entered the social terrain surrounding The Kominas is illustrative of the extent to which the band's social networks are embedded in digital media. I read in *The Taqwacores Zine* an apt description of this digital rite of passage, an initiation ritual common to most followers of The Kominas and other Taqwacore bands. Zine contributor PaddyCakes, a twentysomething, West Indian woman living in Queens, New York, describes how she became a part of the scene:

> A few months into college in 2004ish, a friend of mine told me about this online makeshift book called the 'Taqwacores.' I didn't pay too much attention to it, but he made it a huge deal. He went on and on how there are kids out there like me, 'brown kids, Muslim kids.'. . . I check out online, bought the book off Amazon, and read it in like a day . . . Weirdly enough, as if Mike attached low-jack in the books, he added me on Myspace, then the Kominas, it spiraled into this huge community. I was excited! I spend loads of time chatting up kids all around the world about music . . . Up until a year ago, I finally met face to face with a few online Taqx kids. Moshing around together to songs we listened to over and over on Myspace, emailing each other mp3s that took forever to send since some of us still had dial-up. (PaddyCakes, 2010, pp. 4–5)

After reading her compelling narrative in the zine, I reached out to PaddyCakes and became friends with her on Twitter. *The Taqwacores Zine* consists of six Xeroxed, double-sided pages of text and pictures, stapled together. The font style is set in typerwriter face. In black and white ink, the aesthetics of the zine resembles the grassroots publications of fan-zines in the punk scenes in London and New York during late 1970s and 1980s (Spencer, 2005). The cover art is a collage of skeletons, punk jacket zippers, a shirtless Kurt Cobain, a cartoonish drawing of a bass player with a scarf over his face. The zine was compiled and edited by Kait Foley and Britny Rose, both active (white, non-Muslim) bloggers within the Taqwacore scene. Kait sent out a tweet announcing the release of *The Taqwacores Zine*. After corresponding with Kait on Twitter and sending her $5 via Paypal, I received in the mail a large manila envelope containing the zine, along with a homemade bootleg CD-R of a show recording featuring The Kominas, and other Taqwacore groups.

The availability of free social networking software tools – Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and so on – has enabled the band to extend its social networks beyond the physical constraints of living as Muslim, South Asian minorities living in North America. In a punk grassroots manner, The Kominas has joined efforts with bloggers, music writers, and their friends and fans in creating a strong presence within various digital social spaces. Whether they self-identify or are marked as

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Taqwacore or not, these individuals stake claims to their existence in spite of alienation experienced in the physical world.

I explore the spatial dimension of The Kominas' virtual community by asking: Where are The Kominas' online friends and fans located in the physical world? Where is the band's 'digital diaspora' situated geographically? I deploy the term 'digital diaspora' to encapsulate the social and geographical domain of The Kominas' community. Conceptually, I extend the notion of 'virtual diaspora' as defined in Pinard and Jacobs (2006, p. 84) work on the online hip-hop community in the African diaspora. The authors build on Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' (1991) to describe the virtual communication of online participants. Importantly, they highlight the political nature of the virtual diaspora, as 'a metaphor for a terrain in which, due to experiential and historical dynamics, social agents position themselves oppositionally, as well as opportunistically, to the status quo or the dominant ideology' (Pinard & Jacobs, 2006, p. 84). Similarly, the digital diaspora carries an underlying oppositional edge. My formulation, however, foregrounds social media technology and examines it beyond the intended end-user roles of social networking sites. For that reason, I emphasize articulations of digital media with a focus on the design and functioning with the respect to the formation of the digital diaspora. This theoretical distinction also breaks down the virual-vs-real binary that is implied in much of the discourse about online and offline communities. I contend through the example of Myspace for a holistic approach to the study of the Internet articulates the embeddedness of digital media in physically embodied social life and a seamless connection between on and off-life social dynamics.

My notion of the digital diaspora also contrasts with the conventional meaning of diaspora that is often ethnically, racially, nationally, or sometimes religiously determined. In his study of the Taqwacore scene participants, for example, Murthy (2010) uses the term diaspora (or diasporic) in a conventional manner to refer to ethnicity as an explanation for displacement, for example, the informants' relationship to an imagined homeland of Pakistan and South Asia. My reconceptualization, however, foregrounds the Internet as a productive site of social interactions and community formation around and across the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, race, and religion. By inserting the term 'digital,' I insist upon digital sociocultural processes as not only sites of my research inquiry, but also objects of my study. The digital diaspora redefines the basis of the relationship between home and diaspora, echoing Gopinath's (1995) reading of Bhangra as a critique of diasporic thinking. The concept of digital diaspora, I argue, reconfigures the conventional diaspora-home relationship; it highlights the band as a new social home for its friends and fans in a digitally generated and hosted community.

To investigate and articulate such a digital diaspora, I used methods of ethnography or computational ethnography. With an awareness of characteristics unique to digital media, I participated while making observations in online communities. I also set out to explore the band's digital social terrain beyond what Internet browser displays web information by leveraging software tools such as web scraping and mapping technologies. Web scraping refers a set of programmatic methods designed to extract targeted information from web pages.[4] During the period that I was working on this project, The Kominas had close to 3000 friends on Myspace. To extract location information displayed on the profile pages of the band's friends, I created a software web-scraper in the form of an Application

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Programming Interface (A.P.I.) in the Ruby scripting language. The A.P.I. successfully crawled through the web profile pages of 2867 friends of The Kominas on Myspace and parsed the geographically related text in the source code of these profile pages. Using OpenLayers,[5] a browser-based mapping program, I then turned the extracted geospatial data into a dynamic map[6] that visualizes the friend locations of the band. To fit the format of this article as a textual document, I took a series of screenshots to demonstrate the depth and flexibility of this dynamic spatial visualization.

Computational methods such as web scraping and web-mapping, though undocumented in ethnographic, (ethno) musicological, and other anthropologically informed scholarship, are a part of an emerging conversation about the use of technology in humanist research within the field of digital humanities. Scholars in Communication and Social Sciences, however, have applied similar computational methods such as web-crawling in their works (Halavias, 2000; Lin, Halavais, & Zhang, 2007). Until recently, mapping has been applied only metaphorically as a spatial theoretical framework in many humanities disciplines including music (Bohlman, 1996; Caspary & Manzenreiter, 2003; Swiss, Sloop, & Herman, 1998). Traditionally, ethnographers insert a single-page map in the beginning of their monograph to contexutualize their narratives geographically. What happens when ethnographers investigate communities comprised of multiple sites, some online and others off-line? A digital map not only encapsulates the geographical coverage of these projects, but also articulates the intricate dynamics of social interactions across various geographical boundaries.

With this custom methodological design, I intend to achieve 'radical empiricism,' a term that I use to describe my goals in identifying and documenting. With purposeful attention on specificity and precision, I examine the sociomusical processes that take place in digital social environments and the software infrastructure that supports these interactions. The computational methods that I designed for this project have allowed me to go beyond the textual and discursive dimensions, a path previous unexplored by academic online participant observers. Using this dynamic digital map, I have uncovered new visual and geo-spatial patterns of The Kominas' global friend networks. This map not only visualizes, but also helps contextualize the stories of the band's translocal occupation and diasporic preoccupation. The visualization has made visible patterns of social linkage that I had not anticipated in my physical field research. It has also allowed me to contemplate the spatial dimensions of ethnic belonging and transnational communities while staying rooted in my empirical observations.

Interestingly, the map shows a salient concentration of online friends in South and Southeast Asia. The Kominas' connection to Pakistan is most likely tied to the band members' heritage and personal relations to the country. As discussed previously, Basim, Shajhejan, and Imran of The Kominas are all of Pakistani descent. They have spent significant time living in Pakistan. Basim and Shahjehan lived in Lahore and worked as journalists in 2008 and early 2009. They played in a band called Noble Drew and performed three shows in Pakistan: two in Lahore, one in Islamabad in June 2008. Drummer Imran went to medical school in Lahore. Basim and Imran, along with two friends whom they met in Pakistan, formed a band called the Dead Bhuttos during their tenure in Lahore.

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In an interview with a Pakistani newspaper, Imran expresses on behalf of the band its goal to instigate an independent music scene in Pakistan, alternative to the mainstream pop music industry there. He notes:

> My take on the music industry here is that there are very few live venues here, one in Karachi and now one in Islamabad. But there is no place with proper sound and light that's dedicated to just being a proper music venue. Also, there are around six music channels but they don't seem to promote new music or do stories on bands that are just forming. They're not really like taste makers, they're just going with what sells, I find that kind of frustrating. I think it can be changed, and it's one of the things we'd like to see through. (Imtiaz, 2010a)

Here Imran proclaims the purposes of the transnational outreach of his band and his record label Poco Party. Imran's declaration implies an independence or 'indie' ethos based on an anti-corporation and anti-commercialism attitude. This indie ideology motivates him to establish further connections to Pakistan as not only a diasporic subject, but also as a musician and tastemaker. It enables him to curate a unique kind of Pakistani American sensibility that is based in nostalgia toward his imagined homeland, a sense of belonging to the country of his ethnic origin.

The most surprising pattern that I found on the map is the spread of The Kominas' digital friendship in Southeast Asia (Figure 1). Malaysia and Indonesia are known for a strong presence of local punk scenes in urban centers, in particular Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta (Wallach, 2008), the capital cities of these countries, respectively. The band is well aware of its geographical position relative to the global punk terrain. In a recent interview, Basim launches a defensive remark, reacting to the interviewer who assumed the 'Anglophone world' as a place of authenticity for punk rock. Basim says:

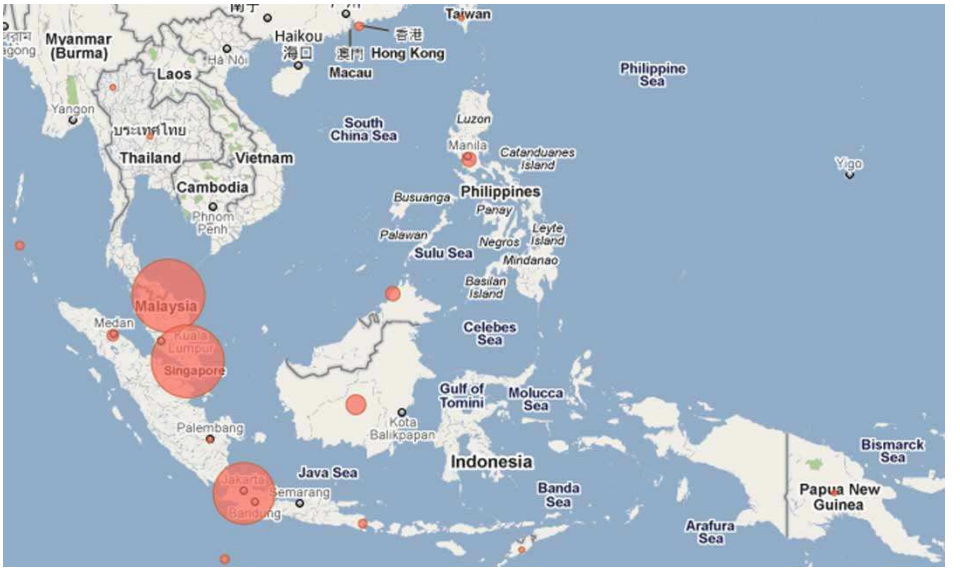

Figure 1. Map 1: The Kominas's Myspace friend distribution in South East Asia.

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> What an ignorant question. Anglophone world? Punk is ten times bigger in Kuala Lampur [*sic*] than it ever will be in the UK, France, or Germany. Or America. No, the reason for forming the Dead Bhuttos, and the rush to put a single online was to show, at least cosmetically, that Pakistan was as capable of putting out punk rock as Turkey, Malaysia, Japan, and Lebanon. The USA is good to sell obscure Malaysian and Japanese records in, but it's not a good place to play this kind of music. We'd do much better in South Eastern Asia, which yes, we get a lot of traffic from online. Tons of people from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia add us. We've been covered in the major Malaysian music magazine. I think it makes more sense for us to play in Malaysia than it does to play in Europe. (Rashid, Foley, Usmani, & Khan, 2010)

In his comment, Basim expresses his feelings of connection to Pakistan and Malaysia. He relegates the US to a place of commerce that spawns the consumption and not the production of punk music. With his claim of the US and the rest of the Anglophone world as sites of punk inauthenticity, he gravitates toward Asia while validating it as a more legitimate site of punk rock music production. In his assertion, Basim highlights the Asian punk scenes on the global punk map while articulating his desire to forge connections with punk music scenes based in Asia. In doing so, he implies his interest in de-centering the Euro-American hegemony of punk music.[7]

Is The Kominas' friend concentration in Southeast Asia be related to the fact that Malaysia and Indonesia have a Muslim-majority population? Religion certainly does not explain the lack of friend concentration in other countries with a Muslim-majority population. Speaking with Basim about my map, I learned about a sectarian difference between the North American and the Southeast Asian experience of Islam. Basim said that the Southeast Asian punk kids that he has befriended online all seem to be 'very religious.' They question Basim for his lax observance of Ramadan and according to Basim, pray five times a day. While alluding to Basim's observations, I am hesitant to draw generalizations regarding the sectarian and regional differences in the practice of Islam between North American and Southeast Asian Muslims.

Nevertheless, the friendship connections to Southeast Asia could be a reflection of the active participation on Myspace among independent and punk rock musicians in Indonesia (Luvaas, 2009). The friend concentration in Malaysia can be attributed to the Malaysia-based users' high web interest in Myspace. Based on the analytics of Google web search interest, the search interest in Myspace by users in Malaysia was ranked fourth in the world, at the time of this research, right below Puerto Rico, the United States, and Australia.[8] The meanings and motivation behind forging these social connections, however, call for further ethnographic processes such as peer-to-peer conversations or interviews.

Finally, these maps show not a cyberpunk fantasy, but a social reality that has burgeoned in a digital space. The Kominas has reconfigured the world's map and created its own punk rock diaspora. This emerging transnational friend-territory, shown in Figure 2, is not just an imagined community. It is a sociocultural space created by punk rock sound and the exchanges of mix-tapes, mp3s, face-to-face visits, shows, tweets, zines, blog posts, hyperlinks, virtual hugs, encouragement and strength.

The Kominas has performed the cultural work of building a translocal home away from home. The band's friendship network is like an archipelago, scattered

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Figure 2. Map 2: The Kominas's Myspace friends worldwide (satellite view).

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across bodies of water. This archipelago of friends is arguably a new kind of diaspora that is not only digitally constructed by the band, but also digitally articulated via emerging digital ethnographic research techniques. This digital diaspora radically transgresses the boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim territories, a highly charged geographical distinction after September 11. It also traverses the Orientalist East-West binary, a geopolitical construction that reinforces the differences between the two halves of the world on either side of the Levantine Coast (Prashad, 2001; Said, 1979). This space has enabled many misfits, 'brownies,' immigrants, queers, and punks to congregate and interact without feeling like an outcast. PaddyCakes captures this sentiment in her contribution of *The Taqwacores Zine*: 'feeling a sense of understanding, a beginning point. We are all still so different from each other. Taqx isn't about who's more hardcore than who, or which is the loudest, or even who wears the most spikes. It's about the sheer happiness we have seeing each other and as soon as we do, hugs are given away freely' (PaddyCakes, 2010, p. 5).

Conclusion

By articulating, quite literally, the contour and shape of The Kominas' transnational community via the technique of web mapping, I have extended Josh Kun's conception of audiotopia from the sound-based psychoacoustic dimension to the ethnographic sociocultural register. Working toward a shared postnational utopian vision, the musicians assert their creative agency in both musical performance and social actions. In the case of The Kominas, music-making has led to various facets of social organizing and real-life consequences such as D.I.Y. tours, recording production, performance exchanges, hangouts, and record label formation.

Borrowing from Foucault's conception of archipelago, I contend that The Kominas' archipelago, as illustrated in my mapping project, is in fact 'physically dispersed yet at the same time covers the entirety of a society' (Foucault, 1980,

p. 196). Unlike Foucault's archipelago, The Kominas' counterpart is not a punitive system itself, but is a subversion of one. It engages in a constant struggle to survive and flourish in the midst of past and present global inequities left over from the legacy of colonial occupations. A steadfastly growing network, this global archipelago fosters a refuge for its member islands, while countering the forces that impinge upon its dispersed but powerful existence.

As I am writing this conclusion, I recall the Taqwacore support of the political events in Egypt, Tunisia, and their neighboring countries known as the Arab Spring. On 11 February, 2011, the day the Egyptian dictator Mubarak fell, TazzyStar, a Bay-area-based activist/blogger that I began to follow via our mutual love for The Kominas, tweeted a widely circulated message. She made an unequivocal declaration that 'Revolution is Taqwacore' (TazzyStar, 2011). This tweet evoked a transnational, anti-status-quo solidarity to support the revolution, and staked claims to the meaning of the Arab Spring through the lens of Taqwacore. Along with two Taqwacore-affiliates based in Indonesia, I retweeted this message.

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Notes

1. On my personal blog [hosted on http://yellowbuzz.org], I compiled and shared a set of field notes, music reviews, and interviews. The blog not only made my work publicly available on the Internet, to the musicians and their friends and peers in my study, but also contributed to the building of the musician-informants' social networks.
2. Qawwali is devotional music associated with Sufism, a mystic sect within Islam in India and Pakistan. The practice of Qawwali extends throughout the Indian subcontinent, but its roots are tied to North India. For more on Qawwali, see Qureshi (1986).
3. Bad Brains started as a fusion jazz band, but came into fame as a hardcore band in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Later the band developed a strong reggae and metal sound, departing its genre anchors in punk and hardcore music. For more about Bad Brains, see Darryl (2004).
4. The term 'web-crawling' is sometimes used synonymously with web-scraping. Typically crawling refers to the technology of extraction all information on the web, similar to the technology of Google search engines. And web-scraping refers to the extraction of specific online information. Scholars in Computer Science, Communication, and Social Sciences, however, utilized web-crawling technology in their studies of web-based communities and population. For an example, see Lin et al. (2007).
5. In OpenLayers, I inserted a base layer of the world's regions – marked by various shades of green in the background – to help contextualize the friend distribution across continental boundaries. I have documented the technical process of this project on my blog: Wendyhsu (2011, January 5).
6. I have hosted this dynamic web map on a server, making it available for interested researchers to interact with it as a mode of ethnographic data discovery and representation. The dynamic map is hosted at: http://beingwendyhsu.info/soundmaps/thekominas/.
7. As I was finishing my dissertation, the Taqwacore movements in Indonesia and Malaysia were emerging. October 2010, Marwan Kamel, the frontman of Chicago-based Taqwacore band Al Thawra, started to use the hashtags #IndoTaqx and #Mtaqx as an effort to locate and connect all Taqwacore-identified users on Twitter. Up until this point, there had been

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60 tweets labeled with these hashtags. I will continue to monitor and document this formation of the transnational social networks.

8. This study is documented in the form of analytics by Google. See this for more details: Google (2012).

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